

## INTRODUCTION

*All of North Carolina's cultural institutions work together to make the state's unique cultural and historical resources accessible for the education and enjoyment of people of all ages in the state, nation, and the world.*

*Vision Statement of the NC ECHO Advisory Committee*

North Carolina has many treasures -- letters written by slaves, tape-recorded reminiscences of old veterans, quilts pieced together from family scraps, photographs of main streets long vanished, paintings by old masters, and diaries of young dreamers. Over the years, the state's libraries, museums, archives, and historical and genealogical societies have diligently collected, preserved, and made accessible special materials such as these to educate, entertain, and enlighten their communities. And among the stacks, storage rooms, and locked cases rests the raw material that will undoubtedly inspire future letters or books, tape recordings, handicrafts, photographs, artwork, and dreams.

In 1998, the State Library Commission made the task of making these treasures more accessible to the people of North Carolina one of its priorities. In essence, they sought to bring these treasures out of the stacks, opening the storage rooms, and unlocking the cases. The following year, the Commission appointed an Access to Special Collections Working Group (ASCWG) to begin the planning process by which this greater access would occur. ASCWG determined that the State's cultural institutions could best achieve this greater access by making use of digital technologies and the World Wide Web. Seeking input from their colleagues, ASCWG held a Special Collections Leadership Conference, in High Point, North Carolina, in March of 2000. Approximately, one hundred twenty representatives of the State's libraries, archives, museums, and historical and genealogical societies gathered to review the progress of major digitization programs from around the country and to make recommendations for a North Carolina project. These representatives reached a consensus for statewide action that included the call for:

- Long-term vision for the project, as well as a process by which to execute it;
- Searchable Web Portal to present existing digital materials and their finding aids created and maintained by North Carolina institutions;
- Set of standards for digitization and access of digital materials;
- Statewide survey of cultural repositories to identify needs, priorities, and opportunities;
- and North Carolina's Department of Cultural Resources to take the leadership role in the project.

This statewide action has been addressed in a variety of ways. A survey was created and all 100 North Carolina counties were all visited by December 2005 (<http://www.ncecho.org/travelog/travelog.asp>). On-going surveying and a final report are currently underway. Continuing education programs have been developed and are held on an on-going basis for cultural institutions ([http://www.ncecho.org/conted/continuing\\_education\\_template.asp](http://www.ncecho.org/conted/continuing_education_template.asp)). Other initiatives include metadata standards, search and retrieval development, and K-12 initiatives involving partners with other statewide programs. In accordance with these initiatives,